

Evelyn Evelyn: Ableism Ableism?

By [Annaham](#) on 9 February, 2010

<http://disabledfeminists.com/2010/02/09/evelyn-evelyn-ableism-ableism/>

Let's get something out of the way: I say this out of love and respect. I say this as a fellow artist (albeit an unknown one). I also very much doubt that the people involved in this project have created it with any bad intentions. That said, however, intentions don't equal a free pass for an end result, particularly if the end result is problematic.

I am conflicted, to put it mildly, about this latest project in which singer and pianist [Amanda Palmer](#) has involved herself (full disclosure: I am a fan of Palmer's music). For those who need a refresher, she and fellow musician [Jason Webley](#) are performing together as Evelyn Evelyn, a fictional set of conjoined twins and former circus performers with an elaborate past who reside in (of course!) Walla Walla, Washington. The group's upcoming self-titled album seems to be getting quite a bit of press in the indie world. Part of [the press release](#) reads as follows:

Rather than being limited by their unique physical condition, the Evelyn sisters prove that two heads are indeed better than one. Audiences will marvel at the twins as they dexterously perform their original compositions on piano, guitar, ukulele, accordion and even drums.

Ah, yes! It's the "overcoming disability" trope, with a heaping side of totally unexpected and not-at-all-stereotypical circus-freakdom. Might Evelyn Evelyn be musical [Supercrips](#)?

And then:

Unsatisfied with the grind of circus life, at the age of nineteen the twins decided to explore a solo career. It was then that they were discovered by Amanda Palmer and Jason Webley, who heard the twins' music on MySpace. Webley and Palmer encouraged the twins and offered to help them record a proper album.

The album will be accompanied by a full US and European tour and – later this year – a graphic novel about the twins' inspiring life, illustrated by Cynthia von Buhler and published by Dark Horse Press.

The stereotypes about disability here are pretty well-worn: according to this (fictional) backstory, the twins were "discovered by" and need "help" from two abled individuals, Palmer and Webley, to realize their musical potential. Add to this their "inspiring" origin story — which is fodder for a graphic novel tie-in — and you've got yourself one hell of a three-ring circus of disability stereotyping.

and you've got yourself one hell of a ~~unbelieving~~ circus of disability stereotypes.

Thus far, it looks like Evelyn Evelyn's primary aim is to be "inspiring" to abled folks (and to be a bit of creative fun for Palmer and Webley). The three songs currently available on [MySpace](#) only serve to continue this trope; "A Campaign of Shock and Awe," in particular, casts the twins as "the 8th wonder of the natural world." Good to know that even *fictional* people with disabilities are not exempt from being cast as "wonders" from which non-disabled people can draw inspiration and "marvel" at. [Sound familiar?](#) Add in a dash of [hipster ableism](#) and you've got something that looks positively transgressive, especially in comparison to the rest of the music industry.

Unfortunately, Evelyn Evelyn seems like a project that is far from actually *being* transgressive, even given the initial appearance of said transgression (because what's more *shocking* and *weird* than conjoined twins, at least according to abled culture?). The project, as far as I can tell, makes no reference to the ways in which actual people with disabilities are treated in Western culture; this probably seems like a tall order for any musical project, but there is a chasm of difference between at least *acknowledging* that there are people like this (in this case, conjoined twins) who do exist and that they probably are affected by ableism, and outright appropriation of this *uniqueness* in the name of art. Certainly, Evelyn Evelyn is fictional, and while Palmer and Webley are not required to make any sort of political statement, the seeming lack of awareness that there are actual conjoined twins and that they do not only exist for abled artists' dressing-up-and-performing purposes is rather troubling.

The larger cultural context of treatment of real people with disabilities, too, is conveniently forgotten (see the lyrics to "A Campaign of Shock and Awe"); the twins seem to exist in a world that is completely free of ableism (in forms subtle and not), harsh social treatment of PWDs by abled people, and pernicious, damaging stereotypes. This is particularly disappointing given that Palmer has written some great, quite un-stereotypical songs about PWDs and people with mental health conditions ([one](#) of which I [wrote about in a blog post](#) for Bitch Magazine).

I am a person with disabilities. I am a music fan. I am (sort of) an artist — one who mostly does graphic work about the disabilities of non-fictional people. However, Evelyn Evelyn, as a multimedia project, seems designed to keep people like me — real people with disabilities — out; this is not a new thing, considering the attitudes that folks in our culture hold about people with disabilities and their acceptable social roles. There are other, more creative ways to portray people with disabilities that don't rely on facile stereotypes or on the ways that PWDs are *already represented* in popular culture. Representing Evelyn Evelyn as variously inspiring, freakish, weird and a "wonder" just reinforces existing stereotypes about PWDs, while ignoring the cultural context in which the project was conceived; while Evelyn Evelyn may be artistic and, at first glance, "different," the attitudes beneath the project's surface seem awfully mainstream.

Special commenting note: *First-time commenters, please read and abide by our [comments policy](#). Kindly refrain from commenting if your argument consists of any of the following:* "You just don't get it," "You do not understand art," "You are taking this too seriously," "Evelyn Evelyn is not real, therefore the stereotypes about disability examined here do not matter," "Justify your experience and/or disability to me, NOW," "~~Who are you criticizing? Amanda Palmer? She is brilliant. how dare you!~~" I am familiar

Very nice you are criticizing another writer. One is writing, now write you: I am jumping with all of these arguments — please be aware that they will probably not add anything to the discussion because they are classic derailing tactics, and I will most likely decline to publish comments that utilize the above arguments.

Similarly, this is not a thread in which to discuss how much you like or dislike Palmer or Webley's music in general; comments to the effect of "Her/his music sucks and here's why" will not be allowed, as they are also derailing.